

Plain Language: The Art of the Message

Media Relationship Key to Effective Communications

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: Business communications has never been more complicated - Cell phones, video conferencing, e-mails, web content, correspondence, reports and presentations cause even the greatest writer or orator to stir with apprehension that their message is clearly understood. Each month this column will explore the many different ways each of us can learn to communicate more plainly.)

Government has an interesting relationship with the media. State agencies like KDHE need the media to help share important messages with the public such as when to get a flu shot and when to boil water if a community water source has been contaminated. When it comes to protecting the health and safety of the public, the media is a very helpful partner to KDHE. Oftentimes we could not do our job as effectively without the help of the media.

When the subject matter is not critical to the health, safety and well-being of Kansans and the environment, it can be much more difficult to engage the media to help share our message. News releases about contests or grant funding may or may not be picked up by the media. News releases about non-critical topics get picked up or discarded based on what else is going on in the news on a particular day. For instance, if there is a major fire in downtown Topeka on a Thursday afternoon and all three TV stations and The Topeka Capital-Journal are covering the story, it is doubtful that a news release about Arthritis Awareness Month will be covered in the news that day. Because of this, the Office of Communications strives to be strategic about what messages to send to the media and the timing of those messages. Even after trying to be strategic, the reality is we have very little control over the release once it leaves our office.

It is also a common misperception that if an organization purchases advertising from a media outlet, that media source will give the organization more coverage. This is not true. The sales staff who sells advertising and the news staff who writes the news are two different departments that rarely interact with each other. The reality of this is an organization can spend thousands of dollars advertising on a particular TV station or in a newspaper and receive little or no news coverage.

So then, what is the role of the media and their news reporters? Many times businesses and organizations seeking media coverage (or trying to avoid it) feel confused about the media's role. I visited the Society of Professional Journalist's Web site at www.spj.org/ethics_code.asp and found some interesting information which I have

paraphrased below that should be considered when thinking about what the media will cover and how they will cover it. It states that journalists should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and try to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Seek out subjects of new stories and give them the chance to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Identify sources whenever possible.
- Clarify the motivations of sources that want to remain anonymous.
- Make sure that headlines, news teases, promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent, oversimplify, or be taken out of context.
- Never distort the content of news photos or videos.
- Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If these methods are used, label it.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods are not possible.
- Never plagiarize.
- Tell the story of diversity and magnitude of the human experience, even when it is unpopular to do so.
- Examine cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.
- Avoid stereotyping.
- Support the open exchange of views, even views that are repugnant.
- Give voice to the voiceless.
- Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting.
- Distinguish news from advertising.
- Help ensure the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

The media is our partner at KDHE, and we would have a difficult time doing our job to protect the health and safety of the public and the environment without the media's help. As with any relationship, understanding and respect are important components in maintaining good relationship---even a relationship with the media.